



Summary of Meeting with Robert McFarlin

Civic Caucus, 8301 Creekside Circle, #920, Bloomington, MN 55437

Friday, April 25, 2008

Guest Speaker: Robert McFarlin, acting commissioner, Minnesota Department of Transportation (MnDOT)

Present : Verne C. Johnson, chair; Chuck Clay, Paul Gilje, and Jim Olson (all by phone)

A. Context of the meeting —The Civic Caucus has been conducting several meetings with leaders of various jurisdictions on the matter of transportation policy and priority setting in Minnesota.

B. Welcome and introduction —Verne and Paul introduced Robert McFarlin, acting commissioner, MnDOT, who has served as acting commissioner following the departure of Carol Molnau in February. A new commissioner, Tom Sorel, was appointed this week by Governor Pawlenty and will take office on Monday, April 28. Today is McFarlin's last as acting commissioner.

Before being named acting commissioner McFarlin served five years as assistant to the commissioner for transportation policy and public affairs. Earlier he had served as MnDOT's director of public affairs and as chief of staff for nearly a decade. He also has served as private consultant. McFarlin has degrees of bachelor of science in business administration and master of arts in speech communication from the University of Minnesota.

C. Comments and discussion —During McFarlin's comments and in discussion with the Civic Caucus the following points were raised:

1. Honor to serve —McFarlin said it is a highlight of his career to have served as acting commissioner. MnDOT is regarded highly among state transportation agencies for its public involvement and quality of engineering staff, he said. It is an exciting time at MnDOT now, he said, as the agency implements a new transportation funding law enacted by the 2008 Legislature. The Legislature has done well by the law in specifying how resources are to be spent.

Problems cited by some others about engineers leaving MnDOT are greatly overstated, McFarlin said. The agency always has had trouble retaining experienced people because pay scales are higher in the private sector. MnDOT, however, has been able to attract large numbers of talented younger engineers and other employees. Many of them who leave for the private sector return later to MnDOT, he said.

As an example of quality personnel, McFarlin singled out John Chiglo, project manager for the 35W bridge reconstruction over the Mississippi River.

2. Construction capacity reached?— A Civic Caucus member noted the presence of many highway construction projects in the metropolitan area, with work going on night and day and weekends, requiring motorists to adjust their travel plans. The member inquired whether it's possible to add to the MnDOT workload.

McFarlin said the department is not maxed out. MnDOT works hard to manage construction with minimum disruption to the system. He cited examples where stretches of roadway are completely shut down to make it possible to finish work faster.

3. MnDOT role with other government agencies —It was noted that the Civic Caucus has had extensive discussions over the last several weeks concerning a proliferation of agencies in transportation, including the addition of a new transit organization by the 2008 Legislature. A member said that transportation is of key importance to the economy of the state but it is very difficult to figure out who, if anyone, has visionary responsibility for the entire system.

McFarlin replied that MnDOT has a very clear primary legislative and constitutional role, to maintain the integrity of 12,000 miles of trunk highways. MnDOT has an excellent relationship with the Metropolitan Council, he said. The agency also works closely with the counties and cities.

4. New county-based joint powers board for transit —McFarlin was asked whether MnDOT is concerned that the Legislature seems to be creating one body for providing revenue for rail transit (a new county-based joint powers board), while the Metro Council is responsible for bus transit.

McFarlin said a new system is not being imposed but that transportation is in transition in the metropolitan area. He said the assignment of rail funding to counties was one reason the Governor vetoed the legislation. The veto subsequently was overridden.

5. Making a rail-vs.-bus choice prematurely? —McFarlin said there are places in the metro area where rail is needed, but that people sometimes jump to a conclusion that rail is the answer before the transportation problem has been adequately defined. He would hope that sober analysis of bus and rail options would be thoroughly explored before a choice is made.

6. Objectives of rail transit —A member noted our discussions in previous weeks have revealed significant differences in objectives for rail transit, with some rail advocates stressing first the importance of rail as being a development tool, and, second as means of moving people.

7. Rail not favored as congestion-reliever —McFarlin said that rail should not be seen primarily as a means of reducing congestion. Anyone who defends a rail proposal as reducing congestion is doomed to failure, he said. If you take a look at the Hiawatha line, he said, you see improvements in mobility for people and some economic development, but you're not reducing congestion on freeways such as 35W.

McFarlin outlined the following advantages of rail:

—mobility for users

—economic development along the route

—opportunities for cluster housing

8. Outside factors in establishing priorities —You're not going to find all transportation priorities relating simply to making traffic move more smoothly, McFarlin said. First, you have to recognize that leaders in the Legislature and in Congress want to see balance in transportation investments according mode (e.g. rail versus roads) and according to geography. The fact that 60 percent of trunk highway investments in the state occur outside the metropolitan area indicates that the Legislature believes that geographic balance is very important.

The Legislature also has specified that MnDOT is to invest \$600 million of new money in bridge repair and replacement. You can argue over the relative priority of a bridge versus a new road, he said, but the Legislature decides on the bridge priority and we go with that.

Another factor to remember, McFarlin said, is the need for several strategies to solve a given transportation problem. For example, he said, the Northstar commuter rail line from Big Lake to downtown Minneapolis doesn't remove the need for further improvements on Hwy. 10 and I-94. We need both the rail and road improvements, he said.

9. Realignment of rail responsibility between MnDOT and Metro Council —A member asked whether, given the key role of the Legislature, the state has an overall transportation plan. McFarlin said MnDOT has such a plan which is both descriptive and prescriptive for highways but is more descriptive for bus, light rail and commuter rail. Commuter rail is longer-distance rail, connecting the urban area with the far suburban area, usually on established regular railroad tracks. An example is the Northstar rail line from Big Lake to Minneapolis, now in construction. Light rail is usually within the heavily-built-up urban area and usually has its own new right-of-way next to or within an existing roadway. An example is the Hiawatha line from the Mall of America to downtown Minneapolis. This is where coordination with the Metro Council is so key, he said. The Legislature had assigned MnDOT chief responsibility for commuter rail, but a bill is now working its way through the Legislature—with MnDOT support—to place policy for commuter rail in the Metropolitan Council, which already is responsible for policy on light rail. The Federal Transit Administration was confused by the assignment of commuter rail to MnDOT and light rail to the Metropolitan Council.

10. Leadership role of the Governor —The Governor is intimately involved in transportation policy, McFarlin said. He disagreed with observations that perhaps the Governor is not providing overall transportation policy leadership. The Legislature chose to enact a different funding approach from that recommended by the Governor. However, a Civic Caucus member observed that Governor has no state planning agency and that there doesn't seem to be a unified transportation policy plan for the entire state that includes tradeoffs between roads and rail.

11. Overall transportation policy structure is adequate? —A member inquired whether McFarlin believes that the state transportation policy structure, involving the Governor, the Legislature, MnDOT, and the host of local jurisdictions, is working adequately and needs no changes. McFarlin replied that he sees no need for a massive overhaul.

Turning to the Metropolitan Council's area of jurisdiction on transportation, McFarlin said that metro area transportation needs extend far beyond the seven counties in the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan Council. That's why, he said, MnDOT is supporting the placement of commuter rail under the Council, as he mentioned previously

12. New transportation funding options —Looking to the future, McFarlin sees potential in some kind of mileage-based tax. Experiments are under way in that regard, he said. It might be possible to vary such a tax by time of day and location of travel, he said.

McFarlin said some people confuse mileage-based taxation with congestion pricing. Congestion pricing, such as is in effect on I-394, is primarily a traffic management tool, not a revenue-raising measure.

13. Thanks —On behalf of the Civic Caucus, Verne thanked McFarlin for meeting with us today.